

**Recommendation of Historic Landmark Designation
The Native American Center for the Living Arts (“The Turtle”)
25 Rainbow Boulevard**

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Name and address of property owner:

Nfr Turtle Llc, 25 Rainbow Boulevard, Niagara Falls, NY 14303

Assessor’s parcel number and address of the landmark site:

SBL #158.12-1-20; 25 Rainbow Boulevard, Niagara Falls, NY 14303

Available surveys, sketches, photographs or drawings of the property:

Reference attached

Legal description of the property:

Reference attached

Zoning of the property:

D1-C

General statement of the current condition of the property:

Property is currently disused and unoccupied. Though the building appears to be in fair condition, signs of neglect and decay are evident in the peeling paint, cracking craft stucco, and vegetation growing on the roof and facades. An alteration leaves the building without its rear monumental staircase and retaining wall tail.

Historic Preservation Commission’s proposed action:

Designate a Historic Landmark

Land Acknowledgement

The Historic Preservation Commission acknowledges that the land upon which we gather is the traditional territory and ancestral home of the Neutral Nations, the Anishinaabe Nations, and the Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

The Commission recognizes that Niagara Falls is part of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant of friendship, good minds, and peace. This Covenant, established in 1142 is an agreement between the people of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabe Three Fires Confederacy. To co-exist peacefully, upon this land, through mutual respect and understanding. As one family, living, hunting, gathering, and fishing the waters they share surrounding the Great Lakes. As its original land stewards, and caretakers of the Great Lakes, its Islands, the Upper and Lower Niagara Rivers, its estuaries, surrounding lands, and all that lives and grows, in and on them.

The commission also recognizes that Niagara Falls is part of the Two Row Wampum Treaty. A mutual agreement between the people of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Dutch government in what is now New York State. This treaty has been the basis of all treaties between Indigenous Nations, European Nations, and governments of the Western Hemisphere since 1613.

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The commission recognizes that Niagara Falls is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island who live alongside Euro-American Settlers, newcomers, and people whose ancestors were enslaved by Colonizers across the Western Hemisphere and the Caribbean.

We honor the Indigenous people of this land for their history of welcoming people of many Nations to the beauty and natural wonder that is Niagara Falls.

We are grateful to live and work on this land.

Introduction

The Native American Center for the Living Arts (NACLA), commonly known as “The Turtle”, was completed in 1981 and designed by principal architect Dennis Sun Rhodes-Hinono’ei / Northern Arapaho: Wind River Nation while working as design lead for Hodne/Stageberge partners Inc of Minneapolis. The Turtle was built to exhibit and celebrate the Indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, through art, history, and culture. It was a vital breakthrough in the self-determination of the local Indigenous community to recover, revitalize and reserve Indigenous culture after hundreds of years of oppression and genocide by European settlers. The building’s symbolic design refers to the Haudenosaunee Creation Story in which the world was created on the back of an ancient Sea Turtle. It features large porthole “eye” windows which gaze toward the Upper Niagara River Rapids and a geodesic dome roof which contains a skylight in the shape of an eagle presiding over a circular 250 seat performance theater within. The geodesic dome roof was prefabricated adjacent to the building on site and craned into location on top of the building – a daring feat of engineering and representative of the fascination with prefabrication methods in architecture and engineering at the time.

The building’s unique physical characteristics represent an exceedingly rare interpretation of the postmodern movement of architecture in its symbolic form and could be considered an example of a “Duck Building”, a term coined by noted postmodern architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi to describe a building whose form expresses its purpose. The building belongs to the subset of postmodern architectural theory known as semiotics, where symbolism lost from traditional architecture in the era of “form follows function” rationalist modernism came back into the architectural lexicon. In addition to the building’s unique cultural and architectural significance, The Turtle has become a distinct visual feature of the area fronting Niagara Falls State Park and was an important gathering place and center of Indigenous lifeways and Indigenous world views prior to its premature closure.

Given this significance, this structure is eligible for designation as a historic landmark under the Niagara Falls City Charter Chapter 1335-05.A, specifically Criteria 1, 2, 3, and 5, as it:

1: Is associated with the life of an individual or a group of people or events significant in national, state, or local history.

The Native American Center for the Living Arts is the physical embodiment of the self-preservation of Indigenous culture. The center featured exhibits of Indigenous artists from across the Western Hemisphere which included cultural arts such as beadwork, silverwork, stonework, sculpture, and paintings. The NACLA served as the center of the local Indigenous Community

with traditional Pow Wows. Space for contemporary Indigenous art was also included in the center to continue the rich tradition of understanding life through art.

2: Embodies distinctive characteristics of an architectural style, period, or a method of construction.

The building’s unique physical characteristics embody an exceedingly rare interpretation of the postmodern movement in its symbolic form. The postmodern period of architecture was a reaction to the placeless and often generic buildings of high modernism, which had begun to fall out of favor by the 1960s. Postmodern architecture instead favored the use of unusual and sometimes illogical forms and symbolism for their own sake instead of the strict “form follows function” ideology and lack of ornamentation of high modernism.

In addition to embodying these distinctive attributes of the postmodern movement in architecture, The Turtle features a geodesic dome roof which was prefabricated adjacent to the building on site and craned into location on top of the structure. This daring feat of engineering, in addition to being a highly unique method of construction, is representative of the fascination with prefabrication methods in architecture and engineering at the time.

3: Represents the work of an acclaimed builder, architect, designer, or landscape architect.

The building was designed by Dennis Sun Rhodes, Hinono’ei / Northern Arapaho: Wind River Nation while working as design lead for Hodne/Stageberge partners Inc of Minneapolis. Sun Rhodes attended architectural school at Montana State University School of Architecture, becoming the first person from the Wind River Nation to attend college. Sun Rhodes gained a national reputation for designing buildings for Indigenous Nations across the country, including the Minneapolis American Indian Center, the Division of Indian Work Building in Minneapolis, and the Piya Wiconi Building at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. His designs are noted for incorporating symbolic forms reflecting elements from the local Indigenous Nations who would utilize them.

Indigenous architects of notoriety are seldom celebrated and are underrepresented in the design industry. The architectural profession infamously lacks diversity; both racial and socioeconomic. According to the American Institute of Architects, as of 2021 only 419 of their total 94,739 members identified as Indigenous People - .4%.¹

5: Because of a unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood.

The Turtle’s siting and distinctive design fronting Niagara Falls State Park and peering over to the falls (themselves revered as a sacred site by Haudenosaunee people), establishes the building as a landmark feature of the neighborhood which has greeted the community and tourists for over forty years in one of the city’s most prominent locations. Its construction, siting and design elevates awareness of Indigenous culture, presence, and identity on Colonial Lands.

¹ American Institute of Architects. “Membership Demographics Report 2021.” July 2022.

Site and Building History

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy

The 1764 Treaty of Niagara gathered representatives of 24 Indigenous Nations together at Fort Niagara to discuss an alliance with the English. These included representatives from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Detroit Wyandot, Anishinaabeg and Menominee, as well as those from the Seven Nations and Western Confederacies of Canada. The agreement reached was the surrender of a four-mile strip of land along the shoreline of the lower and upper Niagara River by the Seneca Nation. This strip secured the portage and road to Fort Niagara. It also allowed the Seneca Nation to renew peace and friendship with the British. This surrender of lands by the Seneca nation marks the first land cessions made under the protocols of the Royal Proclamation’s clauses relating to Indigenous Nations and their lands. It is the most important outcome of the Treaty of Niagara.²

The 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua between the United States and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy affirmed the rights of the latter to most of the land in Western New York but gave New York State the rights to a one-mile-wide portion of land running along the Niagara River between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. Known as the New York State Reservation or the Mile Strip, it was given to the State for the purpose of building a road. This includes the land where The Turtle now stands.

At the Treaty of Big Tree in 1797, the Seneca Nation reluctantly ceded most of the remainder of their land in New York State, and the Holland Land Company subsequently took title to it. The Seneca and other Haudenosaunee people were left with eleven reservations within the state of New York, five of which were in Niagara, Erie, Chautauqua, and Cattaraugus Counties.

The passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830, signed into law by President Andrew Jackson, authorized the President to grant lands west of the Mississippi River in exchange for Indigenous lands within existing state borders. This paved the way for the United States Government to attempt to claim the five Western New York reservations including Buffalo Creek, Tonawanda, Oil Springs, Cattaraugus, and Allegany Reservations, intending to sell the land to European settlers and displace the Indigenous peoples farther west. Enabled by the Doctrine of Discovery, a Papal Bill which allowed the seizure of lands inhabited by Indigenous people under the guise of “discovering new lands” (meaning land not inhabited by Christians). The concept of terra nullius was a major part of the discovery doctrine, particularly around the Indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere. Terra Nullius, Latin for “nobody’s land” was cited as justification to claim land, despite Indigenous groups already present. A coercive treaty of Buffalo Creek (also known as The Treaty with the New York Indians) between the Six Nations Confederacy, signed in 1838 resulted in the dissolution of the Buffalo Creek Reservation. By far the largest of the five at 138 acres; it encompassed the land that is now the Towns of Marilla, Elma, and West Seneca as well as the City of Lackawanna and South Buffalo. However, resistance to the treaty resulted in four reservations remaining in Seneca Nation Territories. Some residents of the Buffalo Creek Reservation were removed to Kansas or relocated to the four remaining Territories of the Seneca Nation, where their descendants still reside.³

² Hele, Karl S. “Treaty of Niagara, 1764.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. January 11, 2021.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/treaty-of-niagara-1764>. Accessed December 12, 2022.

³ Adams, Elizabeth. “Re: The Turtle Draft Landmark Recommendation.” Received by Brett Doster, September 25th, 2022.

The Turtle

Planning

In the mid 1970’s, the Haudenosaunee had developed a strong concern that their culture needed bolstering after centuries of the United States Government controlling nearly every action of tribal life despite not overtly trying to dissolve tribal governments and erase Indigenous language, religion, and art in totality. In parallel to other civil rights movements of the 1960’s, Native American activism grew quietly until a series of protests gained national attention, including the 19-month occupation of Alcatraz Island that started in 1969, the 1972 cross-country caravan known as the Trail of Broken Treaties that ended with the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices in Washington D.C., and the occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota by as many as 200 Oglala Lakota activists for 71 days in 1973.⁴ It’s moments of activism and advocacy that lead to several pieces of major federal legislation to preserve and support Native American life. It is during this moment of upheaval that the Native American Center for the Living Arts can trace its roots.

In 1970 Wilmer “Duffy” Wilson, Tuscarora/Beaver Clan/Six Nations: Tuscarora Territory, a sculptor, partnered with several prominent, nationally known Indigenous Americans including Buffy Sainte-Marie, Rupert Costo, and Arthur Junaluska, to establish the Native American Center for the Living Arts in New York City.⁵ The Center was dedicated to “countering racial stereotypes, promoting the preservation of the visual and performing arts of Indigenous Peoples and to the development of new forms of creative and cultural expression.”⁶ While the organization had large plans and wide participation from many different tribal nations, they were never able to accomplish long-term programmatic goals.

The original group of founders allowed Wilson to take over the organization and relocate back to his home on the Tuscarora Reservation.⁷ In March 1975 Wilson reestablished The Center in a Niagara Falls storefront at 466 3rd Street, just around the corner from the newly completed Carborundum Center and the under-construction Niagara Falls Convention Center.⁸ A \$5,000 “welcome grant” from the New York State Council on the Arts covered the initial rent, phone, and other startup costs.

Open daily from 10am to 6pm, The Center was comprised of three different sections.⁹ First an art gallery to display contemporary Indigenous-made artwork, then a shop to sell handicrafts and jewelry, and lastly a museum space to display “several hundred contemporary and antique Indian artifacts from tribes across the U.S. and Canada.”¹⁰ They also offered programming for both Indigenous artists and the general public. The positive response and support from the community only helped to solidify the plans to establish a permanent and dedicated space.

⁴ Jeff R. Keohane, “The Rise of Tribal Self-Determination and Economic Development,” *Human Rights* 33, no. 2 (2006): 9.

⁵ Laurence Hauptman, *The Iroquois Struggle for Survival: World War II to Red Power* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 233.

⁶ Laurence Hauptman, *The Iroquois Struggle for Survival: World War II to Red Power* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 233

⁷ Nancy Tobin Willing, “New Falls Facility Provides a Center for Indian Culture,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*,

⁸ Nancy Tobin Willing, “Arts Undaunted by Tight Cash,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, January 4, 1976.

⁹ “Museums,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, September 18, 1976.

¹⁰ Nancy Tobin Willing, “New Falls Facility Provides a Center for Indian Culture,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*,

As Duffy Wilson detailed in a 1979 U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development publication, the idea for the building to be in the shape of a turtle was his and a co-worker’s:

One day the Cultural Director and I were sitting and talking about all this, and there was a turtle shell on the table. Suddenly we realized we wanted a building in the shape of a turtle to house our center. You see, in Iroquois belief, this earth we walk on sits on the back of a turtle, so the turtle means life to us. Turtle rattles are important to our ceremonies, and one of our clans is the turtle clan. So it was an idea, but we knew the costs would be almost unimaginable, and we didn’t have the money. So we let it rest.¹¹

Wilmer “Duffy” Wilson, Tuscarora/Beaver Clan/Six Nations: Tuscarora Territory, was a nationally recognized sculptor. He was born on the Tuscarora Reservation where he was a lifelong resident. Duffy Wilson served on the Board of Regents for the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was a producer of Indigenous cultural festivals for Artpark in Lewiston, the Erie County Fair, and Smithsonian Institution. He lectured extensively on Haudenosaunee history and culture and was a fervent advocate for the preservation of the traditional Haudenosaunee ways. His lifelong dream was for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to regain the level of cultural and political prominence that it once had. Duffy Wilson’s sculptures are in the Heard Museum in Phoenix, the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C., the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa, and McMichael Collection in Kleinburg Ontario. His work can be contributed to an artistic revival among the Haudenosaunee; with some 60 artists work having been directly influenced by Wilson.¹²

Sometime later, Wilson was approached by a professional research and development group who had heard of the Center and their ambitions to build their own space.¹³ Together they submitted a proposal to the Economic Development Administration (EDA) secured a \$4.9 million grant. Established by the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965 as a bureau within the U.S. Department of Commerce, the EDA was tasked with creating and retaining jobs and to help stimulate industrial and commercial growth in distressed rural and urban communities across the nation.¹⁴ Their request for federal funding to construct and open the NACLA came right on the heels of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 and several other pieces of legislation that allowed tribal organizations to take over the administration of various federal programs access to necessary services and financial assistance.¹⁵

The initial plans submitted and approved by EDA had the Center being built at Artpark in Lewiston. But project leaders soon turned their sights to downtown Niagara Falls on the newly constructed Rainbow Mall adjacent to the falls. This new site was favored by Center leaders as the waterfalls are considered a sacred site in Haudenosaunee beliefs and the center would be the closest structure to the falls on the

¹¹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Neighborhoods: A Self-Help Sampler*, (Washington D.C.; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1979), 95.

¹² “Wilmer ‘Duffy’ Wilson Dies; Renowned Tuscarora Sculptor”, *The Buffalo News*, October 22, 2002.

¹³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Neighborhoods: A Self-Help Sampler*, (Washington D.C.; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1979), 95.

¹⁴ “History of the EDA,” U.S. Economic Development Agency, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.eda.gov/archives/2016/50/history/>.

¹⁵ Jeff R. Keohane, “The Rise of Tribal Self-Determination and Economic Development,” *Human Rights* 33, no. 2 (2006): 9.

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American side. The proximity to the falls was also preferred as it was more accessible to tourists.¹⁶ Dennis Sun Rhodes later reflected:

“The Indian people always have a sacred place on the earth. For the Iroquois Nation, Niagara Falls is their place of worship. The white man’s side, the reality side, is that the Turtle has to survive economically. So it is placed at a tourist focal point, which Niagara Falls is.”¹⁷

The Niagara Falls Urban Renewal Agency approved the project in February 1977 and EDA gave their final approval two months later.¹⁸ Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on September 19, 1977.¹⁹

Hodne/Stageberg Partners Inc. of Minneapolis was selected to design the Center. Founded in 1968 by Thomas Hodne and James Stageberg, the firm operated until 1982 with a wide-ranging portfolio including architectural and urban planning projects.²⁰ Known for their modern designs, most of their work is in Minnesota and other points west. In 1974 the firm had received national attention after building 1199 Plaza, a mixed-use affordable housing complex in New York City.²¹

Leading the design team at Hodne/Stageberg was Dennis Sun Rhodes, a noted Hinono’ei / Arapaho architect.²² Sun Rhodes joined the firm in the early 1970s, eventually becoming partner. While with the firm, Sun Rhodes also designed the Piya Wiconi Building at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the Minneapolis American Indian Center, and the Native American Learning Center, a temporary structure built as part of the 1976 Smithsonian Institute’s Folklife Festival.²³

Sun Rhodes was the first of the Wind River Nation to attend college. He graduated from the Montana State University School of Architecture in 1972.²⁴ His designs are noted for incorporating symbolic forms reflecting elements from local Indigenous cultures who would utilize the buildings. Sun Rhodes would later note that during his architectural education his use of symbolism learned from growing up in a tribal setting was actively discouraged in favor of the pedagogical norms of the school.²⁵ Sun Rhodes, and the Postmodern movement, reacted against this paradigm.

Sun Rhodes reflected on his symbolic methodology in a 1990 interview with Northeast Indian Quarterly:

¹⁶ “Ruling Awaited on Site Change,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, March 9, 1977.

¹⁷ “News, Notes & Opinions,” *Architecture Minnesota*, August / September, 1981, 13.

¹⁸ Bob Kostoff, “Falls to Get \$4.9 Million Indian Center,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, February 18, 1977. ; “Construction To Begin on Falls ‘Turtle’,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, April 7, 1977.

¹⁹ “‘Turtle’ Complex At Falls Started,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, September 21, 1977.

²⁰ Minnesota Modern Masters: Tom Hodne and James Stageberg (interview with Tom Meyer and Bill Beyer) 11:11, MNSAH, <http://vimeo.com/172812006>

²¹ Paul Goldberger, “First-Rate Housing Opens in Harlem,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1974.

²² Bob Dearing, “Though Start Slow, ‘Turtle’ Museum Seems Worth Wait,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, February 15, 1981.

²³ “Architecture at a Glance,” *Architecture Minnesota* 2 no. 2 (1976): 11.

²⁴ Carol Schmidt, “College friendship is impetus to proposed MSU Native American Student Center,” *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, May 30, 2005.

²⁵ Minnesota Society of Architectural Historians. “Minnesota Modern Masters: Dennis Sun Rhodes with Dan Feidt 15:02”. Vimeo, uploaded by MNSAH, 2019. <https://vimeo.com/387738735>. Accessed 11/7/2022.

I’ve evolved what I call the “American Indian Architectural Design Process,” which involves American Indians’ cultures, symbols, and attitudes. The Amerindian architecture design process uses these attributes as creative inspiration in putting a building together. For instance, I am the cultural design architect for the Native American Center for the Living Arts in Niagara Falls, which is designed in the form of a turtle. That is an epitome example of American Indian architecture, where you actually have a building that looks like a symbol. At the same time though, I have learned to make sure the symbolic architecture is functional—that it meets its program intent and that it’s useable. So that’s the other thing that I learned to do—to marry the program with the culture and to come up with something unique.²⁶

Commensurate with that ideology, Sun Rhodes used the idea of a turtle-shaped building first envisioned by Wilson. The building’s unique shape refers to the Haudenosaunee Creation story that animals created the world as we know it on the back of a Sea Turtle.

The building’s unique physical characteristics represent an exceedingly rare interpretation of the postmodern movement in its animalistic form and symbolism. The postmodern period of architecture (generally 1960-1990) was a reaction to the placeless and often generic buildings of high modernism, which had begun to fall out of favor by the 1960s. Postmodern architecture instead favored the use of unusual and sometimes illogical forms and symbolism for their own sake instead of the strict “form follows function” ideology and lack of ornamentation of high modernism.

The Turtle could be considered an example of a “Duck Building” as coined by noted postmodern architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi wherein a building’s form expresses its purpose. The building also belongs to the subset of postmodern architectural theory known as semiotics, where symbolism lost from traditional architecture in the era of “form follows function” rationalist modernism came back into the architectural lexicon.

In addition to embodying these distinctive attributes of the postmodern movement in architecture, The Turtle features a geodesic dome roof which was prefabricated adjacent to the building on site and craned into location on top of the structure. This daring feat of engineering, in addition to being a highly unique method of construction is representative of the fascination with prefabrication methods in architecture and engineering at the time.

The three-story, 60,000 square foot structure contained “a gallery of contemporary Indian arts, historical museum, performing arts amphitheater (under the domed turtle ‘shell’), craft shop, restaurant, and library-classroom areas for cultural programs.”²⁷ The permanent collection of the Center included “thousands of artifacts, 200 contemporary artworks, a 500-volume library, and an archive of photographs – all from around the continent.”²⁸ The organization also published Turtle Quarterly, a “glossy arts and current affairs magazine.”²⁹ A restaurant serving traditional Indigenous food was located in the head of the building.

The turtle’s symbolic form features large porthole “eye” windows which gaze toward the Niagara River and a geodesic dome roof which contains a skylight in the shape of an eagle presiding over a circular, 250

²⁶ Northeast Indian Quarterly, Volume VII, Number 2, *Architectural Design: An American Indian Process*, Summer 1990

²⁷ John C. Given, “Turtle... Indian Symbol of Creation,” *Olean Times Herald*, September 12, 1981.

²⁸ John C. Given, “Turtle... Indian Symbol of Creation,” *Olean Times Herald*, September 12, 1981.

²⁹ “Lack of Money Imperils Indian Cultural Center,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 1993.

seat performance theatre within. The building’s form refers to the Haudenosaunee Creation Story in which “...a pregnant woman falls through a hole in the sky into a cold, dark abyss known as Water World. Where she is caught by a flock of geese who by putting their wings together break her fall, and slowly descend and gently lay her on the back of an ancient Sea Turtle.

Turtles have many meanings in Indigenous Culture. Turtle shells are used as a rattle in ceremonies to represent the shaking of the Earth, as well as the heartbeat of Mother Earth. The Turtle Shell has thirteen plates on its back which represent the thirteen Moons. There are smaller outside plates that represent the number of days between each new moon, like a calendar, to track the number of days and count time.

So, Sky Woman is placed on the back of a giant Sea Turtle where they say a little muskrat dove down to the bottom of Water World and brought up a small piece of mud, placing it on Turtles back where it began to grow. This inspired Sky Woman to sing, dance and spread around the seeds she brought with her from Sky World. Creating the Western Hemisphere as we know it today.

The building’s geodesic domed roof is a representation of Sky World. Imbedded into its dome is a skylight in the shape of an Eagle, representing the story of the Great Peace in which the Peacemaker choses a Great White Pine/ Great Tree of Peace, whose needles always grow in a cluster of five and reaches up to touch Sky Word. The Great White Pine was chosen by the Peace Maker, as a symbol of the unity of Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Atop the Tree of Peace he places an Eagle. The Eagle is the messenger to the Creator, the protector of peace. Placed atop the Tree of Peace and atop the Turtle’s Geodesic Domed Roof, it serves as a lookout to warn the members of the Confederacy if danger approaches.

Embracing its 250-seat performance theater and grand hall is a Circle. The Circle is a widely used symbol in Haudenosaunee culture, it represents unity, strength, and the Circle of Life. Gathering the original Chiefs in a round Circle and around the Tree of Peace. The Peacemaker had them hold hands to make their Circle strong. He showed them that if they remained united and kept strong the Tree of Peace would remain standing. If they let go and broke the Circle the Tree would fall and so too would the Great Peace.”³⁰

Construction

The groundbreaking ceremony was held on September 19, 1977, and included Duffy Wilson, who by then had been named NACLA’s executive director, and Mayor Michael O’Loughlin, turning over the ceremonial shovels of dirt.³¹

While they had secured a sizable grant to cover construction costs, the volatile economy of the late 1970s and its devastating double-digit inflation caused construction prices to rise. “We had a lot of heartaches and a lot of headaches in trying to put this together,” president of the NACLA’s board Huron Miller told a press conference days before the grand opening. To help with these budgeting issues, the NACLA secured an additional \$1.1 million above the original \$4.9 million from EDA, and a \$56,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to cover the professional services of historians, museum professionals, and Native American scholars to prepare the museum display areas and initial Center

³⁰ Adams, Elizabeth. “Re: The Turtle Draft Landmark Recommendation.” Received by Brett Doster, September 25th, 2022.

³¹ “‘Turtle’ Complex at Falls Started,” *Courier-Express*, September 27, 1997.

programs.³² That was then followed by a \$750,000 loan from Chase Manhattan Bank with \$500,000 of that funding intended to support construction and the remaining \$250,000 for operating funds once the Center opened.³³ In fact, construction was stalled for around three months until March 1980 while the center searched for additional funding. In addition to being over budget, the center did not open until a year after its targeted opening date. The building was finally opened to the public in May 1981, 44 months after the September 1977 groundbreaking ceremony.

A joint venture of outfits of Scrufari Construction Co. and Siegfried Construction Co. prefabricated the geodesic dome roof adjacent to the building on site and craned it into location – a daring feat of engineering and representative of the fascination with prefabrication methods in architecture and engineering at the time. The Niagara Falls based Scrufari and Buffalo based Siegfried construction companies were both notable regional contractors who emerged as go-to builders for large scale projects in the post-WWII era. In addition to the NACLA, the companies partnered on several projects over the years including the nearby Hooker Building/Occidental Chemical Center.³⁴

Opening & Operation (1981-1995)

Opening ceremonies for the NACLA were held on May 17, 1981. The festivities featured a speaker’s bureau and traditional Indigenous dance performances, followed by a dinner at the Niagara Falls Ramada Inn.³⁵

The NACLA opened to great acclaim. Flurries of news articles reported on the Center’s unique exhibits and the opening of the restaurant offering traditional Indigenous cuisine; all the articles referencing the structure’s unique Turtle shape and explaining the Haudenosaunee creation story from which the building’s form was derived. Ads for the building proclaimed “The Turtle is alive!”. When it opened, the NACLA was the largest center for Indigenous arts in the Eastern United States. The center hosted Pow Wows, Indigenous dance groups, art, artifacts, exhibitions, and craft festivals featuring artists from across the Western Hemisphere. In 1982 the NACLA was awarded the Niagara Falls Chamber of Commerce’s Progressive Development Award.³⁶

By 1986, the NACLA was beginning to encounter financial struggles. The Center had a lease-purchase agreement on the site with the City of Niagara Falls, centered around a structured 10-year prepayment period with payments in lieu of taxes.³⁷ The Center struggled to complete those payments, on top of covering the operational costs. The already overextended budget was further stressed once the site started accruing property taxes.

The Center heavily depended on money from the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, with supplementary revenue from ticket and gift shop sales and subscriptions, and grants for Turtle Quarterly – a publication highlighting the goings on at the center. In March 1986, a warrant was

³² Bob Dearing, “Indian Museum Director Dedicates Life to Preserving People’s Past,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, October 21, 1979.

³³ “Native American Center In Falls Gets Bank Loan,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, March 16, 1980.

³⁴ “Going Up,” *The Buffalo News*, September 3, 1980.

³⁵ “Opening Set for ‘Turtle’ On May 17,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, April 8, 1981.

³⁶ “Rainbow Awards Presented As Falls Begins Arts Fest,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, February 6, 1982.

³⁷ Bob Kostoff, “Falls to Get \$4.9 Million Indian Center,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, February 18, 1977.

filed at the Niagara County clerk’s office for \$12,357 in back taxes.³⁸ Officials at the Center contended that the taxes went unpaid because the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) had not released its appropriation for the Center in the amount of \$723,000.³⁹ OPRHP in turn responded that the appropriation was held because the Center had not provided proof of a financially sound accounting system.⁴⁰ The quarrel resulted in a four-day long lockout by the State Department of Taxation and Finance. Hearing of the Center’s plight, Thomas Constantino of Amsterdam, NY provided a \$6,000 loan to the center so it could reopen for its planned Easter festivities.⁴¹ The center agreed to pay \$400 to \$500 a month toward the back taxes when the grant money came in.⁴²

In 1988 OPRHP cut the Center’s annual funding, which ranged anywhere from \$500,000 to \$700,000 per year. Without this significant funding, the Center would not be able to support themselves. Within one year they had made dramatic staff cuts and were behind on payments to the City of Niagara Falls and the Urban Renewal Agency. By 1993 the center owed \$102,000 in unpaid electric bills alone.⁴³ The City of Niagara Falls was critical of the Center’s leadership. Dennis Walker, chairman of the City Council remarked “It’s sort of hard to believe that it could not have been run a little better.”⁴⁴

Despite these challenges, the NACLA stayed open. The large eagle skylight provided lighting for the main event space. While the air conditioning and main lighting were turned off, Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation provided enough power to manage ticket and giftshop sales, and to allow an independently operated restaurant in the base of the Turtle’s head to operate.⁴⁵ Even after cutting the admission from \$3.50 to \$2.50, visitors to the Center continued to decrease. Duffy Wilson lamented “It appears like nobody cares about the Turtle.”⁴⁶ In 1995 the NACLA closed after 14 years of operation. To add insult to injury, to settle tax liens, the IRS sold some of the museum’s artifacts and furnishings.⁴⁷ A swift proposal by the University at Buffalo to take over the building for operation as an Indigenous Cultural Center was rejected by the City of Niagara Falls, as the proposal did not include payment of the back taxes.⁴⁸

Closure to Present (1996-2023)

In April 1996, the City of Niagara Falls took the drastic step to foreclose on the vacant building. Just one year later the City sold the Turtle to Niagara Falls Redevelopment LLC, along with more than 200 acres of land in the downtown Niagara Falls area. Backed by Canadian developer Edwin A. Cogan and American billionaire and philanthropist Howard P. Milstein, Niagara Falls Redevelopment LLC agreed to pay the city \$1 million for the Turtle including making \$100,000 annual payments for 10 years.⁴⁹

³⁸ “Tax troubles close Falls Indian Center.” Salamanca Press. March 26, 1986.

³⁹ “‘Turtle’ is back in Business,” *Tonawanda News*, March 28, 1986.

⁴⁰ “‘Turtle’ is back in Business,” *Tonawanda News*, March 28, 1986.

⁴¹ “‘Turtle’ is Back in Business,” *Tonawanda News*, March 28, 1986.

⁴² “‘Turtle’ is Back in Business,” *Tonawanda News*, March 28, 1986.

⁴³ “Lack of Money Imperils Indian Cultural Center,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 1993.

⁴⁴ “Lack of Money Imperils Indian Cultural Center,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 1993.

⁴⁵ “Lack of Money Imperils Indian Cultural Center,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 1993.

⁴⁶ “Lack of Money Imperils Indian Cultural Center,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 1993.

⁴⁷ Neville, Anne. “Long-Vacant Turtle Building Lives on in the Hearts of Many.” *The Buffalo News*. February 8, 2017.

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In 2000 Niagara Falls Redevelopment LLC held a groundbreaking to announce the reopening of the building as an entertainment and cultural center.⁵⁰ Apart from a few occasional events, the entertainment and cultural center never materialized, and the building continued to sit vacant. In 2017 Niagara Falls Redevelopment LLC proposed demolishing the Turtle to build a \$205 million, 20-story hotel on the site. As with the previous plan, plans for the hotel never materialized.

The Native American Center for the Living Arts continues to lay vacant. An alteration leaves the building without its rear monumental staircase and retaining wall tail. The decorative paint has been covered in favor of a monochromatic white scheme. Decades of deferred maintenance are evident in the peeling paint, cracking craft stucco, and vegetation growing on the roof and facades.

⁵⁰ Galarneau, Andrew Z. “New Life for the Turtle Niagara Falls Redevelopment is Looking to Turn the Long-Closed Landmark Into a First-Class Museum -- Perhaps With Help From the Smithsonian Institute.” *The Buffalo News*. December 10, 2000.

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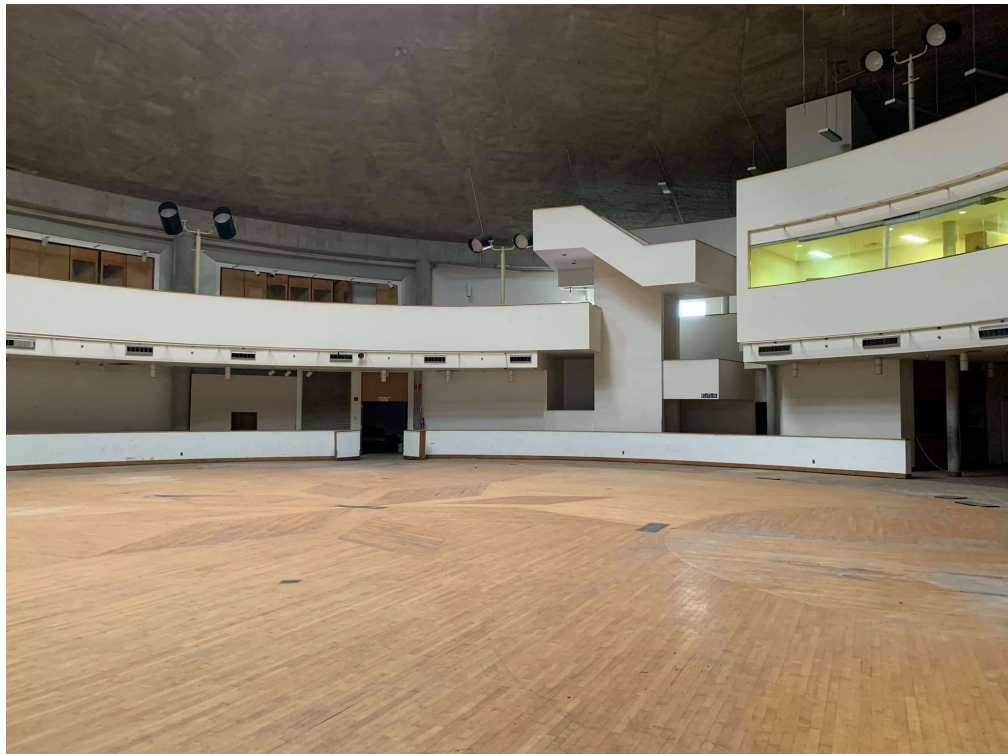
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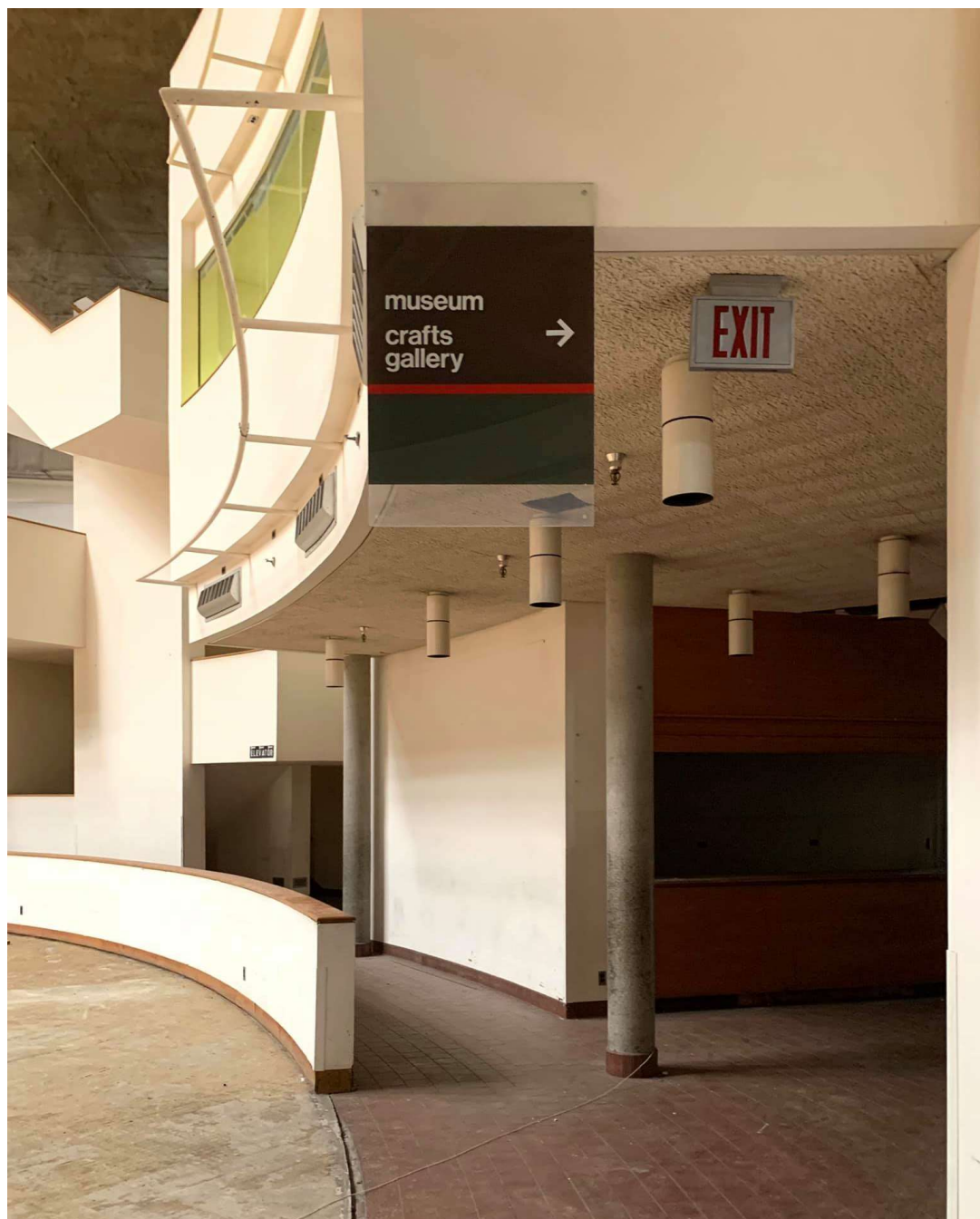
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Seneca-Iroquois National Museum



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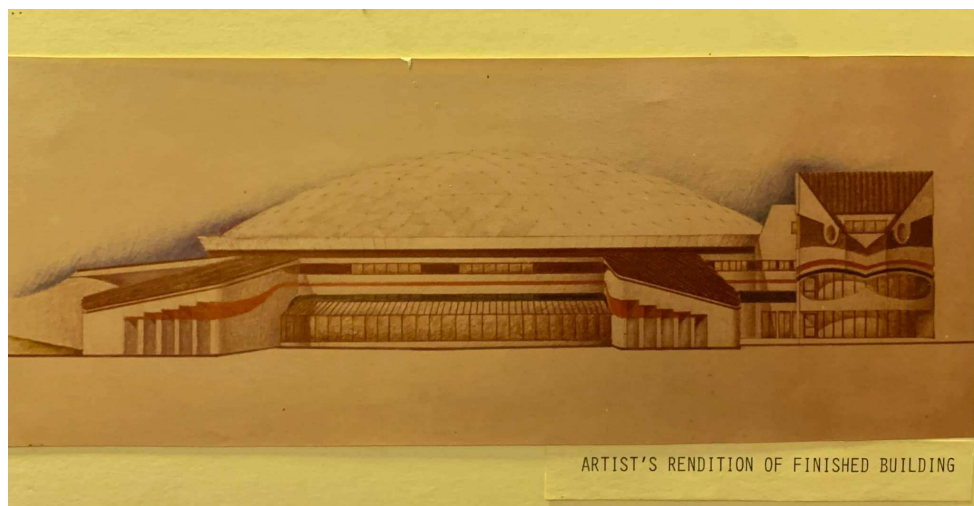
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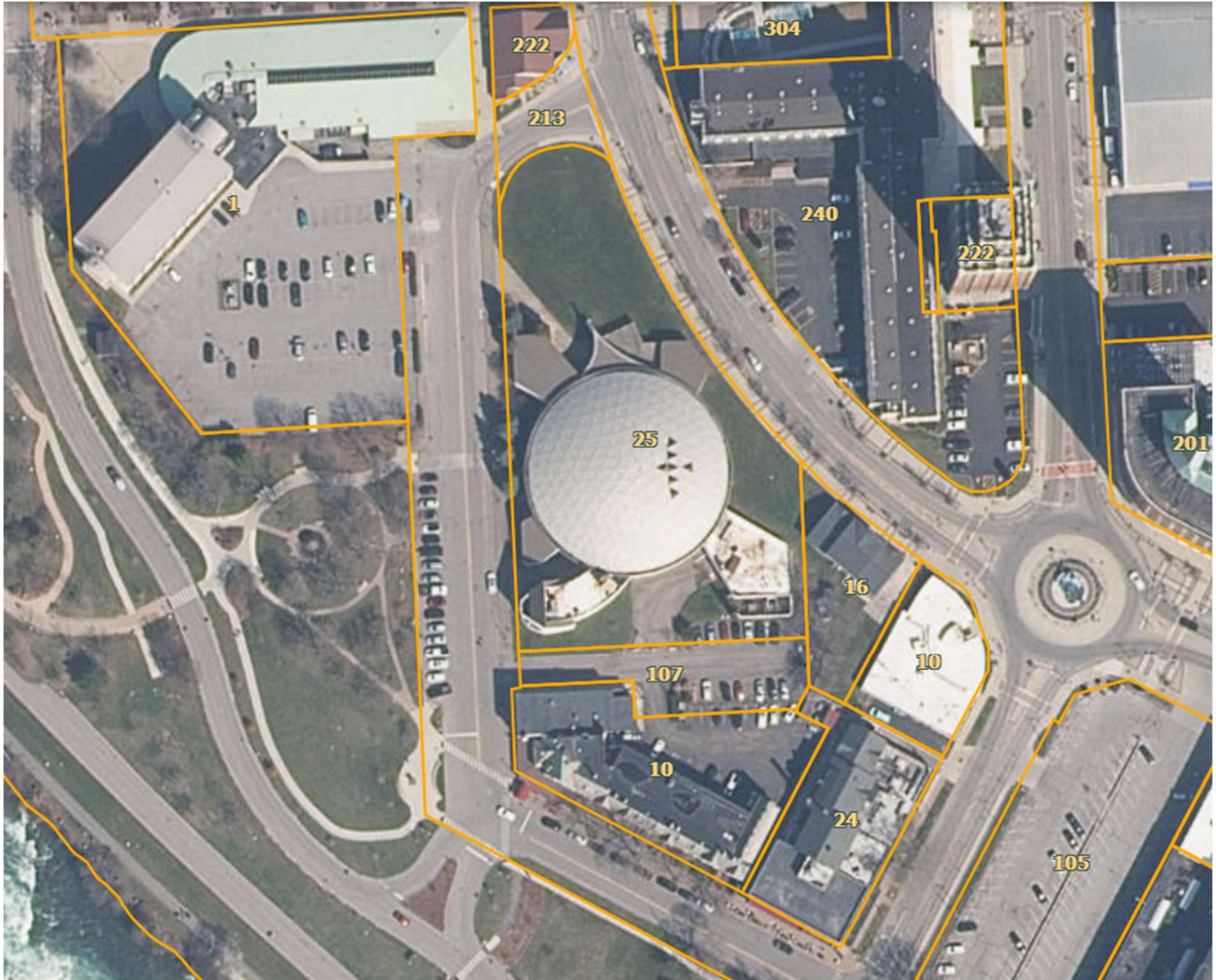
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Seneca-Iroquois National Museum



Niagara County Property Viewer

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OFFICE OF THE CLERK COUNTY OF NIAGARA
WAYNE F. JAGOW, COUNTY CLERK

County Courthouse, 175 Hawley Street, P.O. Box 461, Lackport, NY 14095
Phone (716) 439-7027 Fax (716) 439-7066

NIAGARA COUNTY CLERK RECORDING PAGE
003864

INSTRUMENT # TYPE Deed NUMBER OF PAGES 1

RETURN John P. Bartolomei, Esq.
TO 335 Buffalo Avenue
Niagara Falls, NY 14303

SPACE BELOW RESERVED FOR
COUNTY CLERK'S USE ONLY.

4939
REAL ESTATE TRANSFER TAX
\$ 4010.00
5229
NIAGARA COUNTY

Deeds:
1st Part City of Niagara Falls, New York
2nd Part The Niagara Turtle Corp.

RECORDED
99 MAY - 7 PM 1:45
NIAGARA COUNTY
CLERK'S OFFICE
LACKPORT, NY

MORTGAGE AMOUNT

TAX
DISTRICT:
☐ Check if to be apportioned

MORTGAGE #
RECORDING TAX RECEIPT

BASIC \$ State of New York) is
ADDITIONAL \$ County of Niagara)
SPECIAL \$ I do hereby certify that I have
TOTAL \$ Received on the within Mortgage, being
the amount of the Recording Tax
Imposed thereon & paid at recording.

Recording on the 29th day of May
1999 at 1:45 o'clock
in Liber 2923 of 2000
on page 125 of 125
Niagara County Clerk

Dated this of 1999

Mortgage Tax Clerk of Niagara County

This document contains the Check endorsement required by section 319 of the Real Property Law of the State of New York
DO NOT DETACH

THIS INDENTURE

Made the 4th day of May, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-nine

Between CITY OF NIAGARA FALLS, NEW YORK
745 Main Street
Niagara Falls, New York,

Grantor, and

003864

THE NIAGARA TURTLE CORP.
335 Buffalo Avenue
Niagara Falls, New York,

Grantee.

Witnesseth, that the said Grantor in consideration of One and More Dollars (\$1.00 and More), lawful money of the United States, paid by the Grantee, does hereby grant and release unto the Grantee, its successors and assigns forever,

ALL THAT TRACT OR PARCEL OF LAND, situate in the City of Niagara Falls, County of Niagara, and State of New York being part of Lots 42 and 43 of the Mile Reserve, bounded and described as follows:

BEGINNING at a point in the present east line of Main Street, as an 82.5 foot wide street, distant 169.01 feet south of the south line of Rainbow Center West Mall, formerly known as Falls Street; thence southerly along said east line of Main Street a distance of 353.21 feet to a point; thence easterly at an interior angle of 89°53'39" a distance of 253.61 feet to a point; thence northerly at an interior angle of 90°06'21" a distance of 144.67 feet to the southwesterly line of Rainbow Boulevard South; thence northwesterly along the southwesterly line of Rainbow Boulevard South, and along a curve to the right having a radius of 671.62 feet, an arc distance of 288.56 feet to a point of curve; thence southwesterly along a curve to the left having a radius of 55 feet, an arc distance of 127.94 feet to the point or place of beginning, containing 1.67 acres of land, more or less.

Together with the appurtenances and all the estate rights of the Grantor in and to the said premises.

To have and to hold, the above granted premises unto the said Grantee.

And the said Grantor does covenant with said Grantee as follows:

REC-2923 FALL 127

First, that the Grantee shall quietly enjoy the said premises.

Second, that the Grantor will forever WARRANT the title to said premises.

Third, subject to the trust and provisions of section thirteen of the lien law.

In Witness Whereof, the said Grantor has hereunto set its hand and seal the day and year first above written.

In Presence Of

CITY OF NIAGARA FALLS, NEW YORK

ATTEST:

By:

James C. Galie
JAMES C. GALIE, Mayor

Elsie M. Paradise
Elsie M. Paradise, City Clerk

STATE OF NEW YORK)
 : SS.:
COUNTY OF NIAGARA)

On this ^{5th} day of May, 1999, before me personally came JAMES C. GALIE, to me personally known, who, being by me duly sworn, did depose and say that he resides in the City of Niagara Falls, New York; that he is the Mayor of the City of Niagara Falls, New York, the corporation described in and which executed the within Instrument; that he knows the seal of said corporation; that the seal affixed to said Instrument is such corporate seal; that it was so affixed by order of the City Council of said corporation; and that he signed his name thereto by like order.

Carol A. Antonucci
CAROL A. ANTONUCCI
Notary Public, State of New York
No. 01A45050364
Qualified in Niagara County
Commission Expires October 10, 1999